

CONSIDERING MAILER IN THE POST-AQUARIAN AGE

B R A D S T A G E R

NORMAN MAILER WAS A WRITER FOR HIS TIMES, whose greatest productivity and notoriety ran concurrently with the zenith of American ambition and achievement. His career began as the United States rose to the top of the post-World War II global heap as a superpower and Mailer was there to chronicle that in a distinctively masculine American voice.

I had the good fortune to enter adolescence before the invention of Young Adult literature and thusly first encountered Mailer's work around 1970. His writing has been a part of my reading habit since. Forty five years later, as I consider Mailer's work in the afterglow of the Twentieth Century, it occurs to me that Mailer would probably never be published if he were starting out in these literary times. Instead of writers who reveal the essence of human experience, we now have novelists pandering to daytime television hosts for a spot on their recommended summer reading list, promoters of five-and-dime philosophy and self-help manuals as well as journalists reporting in the caponized tone of public broadcasting. Collectively they serve a popular culture with decreasing intellectual expectation and capacity.

Besides writing at a high level and digging deep within, Mailer was famous for speaking his mind, an ill-advised proclivity in an age when you are probably better off killing someone than offending them or their tribe. A celebrity's errant online posting or decades-old comment unearthed from the permanent record that runs afoul of dogmatic strictures laid down by disciples of the Holy Trinity of Race, Gender, Class, quickly results in censure and assignment to a social re-education gulag. Things were much simpler when a drug bust, alcoholic binge or impolitely psychotic rant simply meant

recovery in a five-star rehab clinic before hitting the media interview circuit for public expiation, followed by a lucrative publishing deal.

Mailer's substantial vocabulary and stoner's insight made him the Mark Twain of the Space Age. But if Aquarius were to wander into an urban redoubt of Twenty-First Century Occupiers, the cadre of progressives would demand to know what government agency he was from, if for no other reason than he favored shirts with collars; a poor way to treat the author of two of the Revolting Sixties' finest documents, *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*.

If the unwashed collective consulted their oracle Siri, they would learn Norman Mailer was above all, a nuanced man, and that is a characteristic American society no longer understands, appreciates or tolerates. Mailer described himself as a "libertarian socialist" and traversed the razor's edge between the two, recognizing that socialism is anathema to individual freedom and also that individuals often take unjust liberties with others by manipulating the levers of power in America. Oscillating between those perspectives was fruitful for Mailer, generating a lot of essays, particularly for *The Village Voice*, and forming the basis for a couple of mayoral campaigns. Now, it's a matter of 'which side of the political fence are you on?'

Even Mailer's choice of a profession was a matter of weighing his quantitative and qualitative characteristics and it came out in his writing. With *Of A Fire on the Moon* his original career aspiration as an aeronautical engineer enhances his storytelling and frames his analysis of the space program's social cost. Even as a Jew with a decidedly liberal bent, he could express admiration for Nazi Germany's rocket scientists who found post-World War II acceptance and lucrative careers leading America to the moon by directing teams of disciplined, crew-cut WASP technicians and engineers in that successful and defining quest.

The book's lengthy passages about balancing the merits of spending large sums of the treasury on expensive fireworks with funding a Greater Society are extensively detailed, like a bureaucrat's white paper. Mailer seems far more excited by the mission to discover what kind of cheese the moon might be made of than the distribution of government cheese, but it's the latter topic that weighs heaviest on his mind.

Contradiction and duality permeate Mailer's life and work because that is the nature of human experience and getting to the heart of individual ex-

perience was his reason for living and creating. Maybe the genesis for that perspective comes from religious training he received as a child, with Judaism's recognition that good and evil reside within everyone. Once you step outside the synagogue and the comfort of home and into the world, that sort of thing can play out in all kinds of ways, with the addition and subtraction of values like left and right, high and low, black and white, male and female, gay and straight.

For Mailer, living life fully and pursuing a variety of experiences is what counts most, and how it all adds up is the basis for individual character, living or fictional. Crafting one's identity, and freely expressing whatever bubbled up from within with minimal boundaries was important to Mailer, as was a willingness to offend, if it came to that.

Given that consideration and the evidence provided by his published letter of support to author Salman Rushdie who offended Islamic clerics to the extent his life was threatened, Mailer would likely align himself with free speech advocates who have decided to promote public events drawing and exhibiting cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad as a way to advance their cause, even as many people consider such acts justification for laws limiting expression.

Indeed, what is acceptable to say, write or depict is becoming more restricted by the day. No one must be offended, the children must be protected. There's always an excuse at hand for thought bullies to trim away at protections afforded by the First Amendment.

One career that might be available to Mailer today would be as a host in talk radio. While the field is dominated by hacks who have built broadcast careers around the antics of Bill and Hillary Clinton (Rush Limbaugh should make a substantial contribution to the Clinton Foundation in return) and short stints serving Republican presidents, there are other hosts with a style appropriate to Mailer's talents. Michael Savage, host of "The Savage Nation" and defender of Borders, Language, Culture comes to mind. At first listen he may come across as a good excuse for hate speech laws, but in fact he's a beatnik conservative who in his early years was employed as a social worker, swilled Kava in Fiji and smoked weed with Allen Ginsberg. Literate (author of 36 books), candid and no qualms about offending anyone, Savage would be a worthy mentor to Mailer on-air.

It has been more than four decades since I first read Mailer and even as his books became longer and my time for reading shorter, it has always been

clear to me there's a need for a writer, social critic and advocate of freedom like Mailer. But if he were still around he just might find it a good idea to take a page from one of his own books, *An American Dream*, and pack up his car for a journey south of the border in search of the next America.